Forest Service

George Washington and Jefferson
National Forests
Lee Ranger District

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**File Code:** 1950 **Date:** August 12, 2020
**Route To:**

**Subject:** Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project

**To:** Interested and Affected Individuals

Dear Interested Party:

The Lee Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (GWJNF) is proposing a project to enhance communities of yellow pine species and improve wildlife habitat in the Sandy Ridge area of Hardy County, WV. This project will be consistent with the goals and objectives described in the *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan George Washington National Forest* (hereinafter referred to as the Forest Plan). An environmental assessment (EA) will be prepared as part of the planning process for this project. Decisions resulting from the analysis will address actions needed to maintain or improve resource conditions in the project area.

We welcome your involvement and encourage your review of the Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project. Specific comments on how to improve the proposal or important things you think we missed are very helpful. Please send your comments, in writing, by September 15, 2020. A thorough description of the proposal, alternatives, and analysis of the effects of each alternative, will be documented in the EA. You can view project information and documents online as they become available at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46063

In an effort to increase efficiency and reduce spending, future communications for this project will be electronic. If you would like to continue to receive these communications, please provide your email address via this web form:
https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=46063

If you do not have access to email or the internet and would like to continue to receive these communications, please contact Jay Martin, North Zone NEPA Planner (see contact information below).

## Project Location

The Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project is located on the National Forest System (NFS) lands in Hardy County, WV, about 6 miles southwest of Wardensville, WV. The project area is about 23,618 acres in size and spans across the Three Springs Run-Lost River, Trout Run and Waites Run – Cacapon River 6th code (HUC 12) sub-watersheds. Project specific maps are posted on the project website.

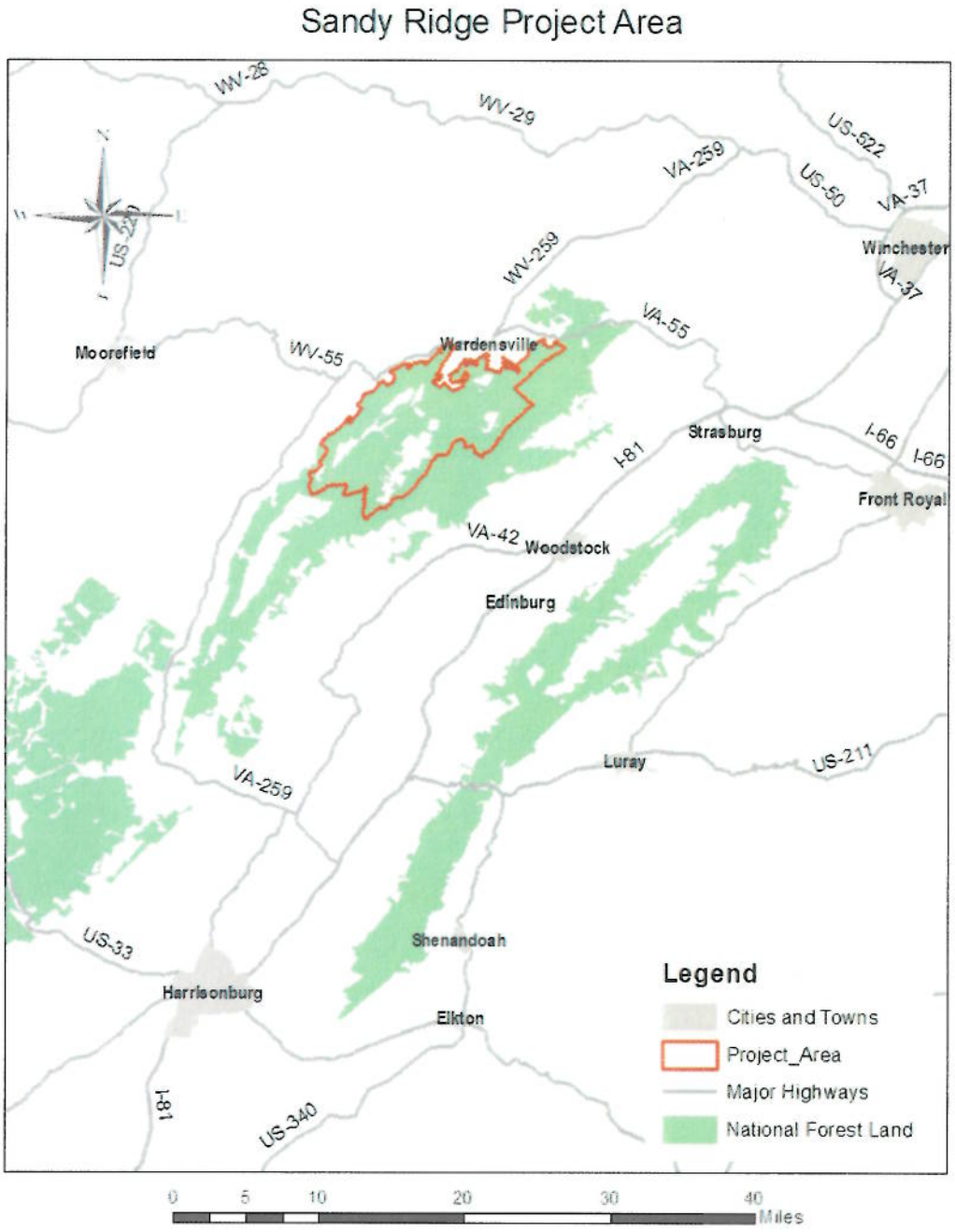


**Figure 1. Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project Vicinity Map.**

## Management Direction

This project will be designed to be consistent with the management direction of the Forest Plan. The project area lies mainly within the Mosaics of Wildlife Management Area (MA - 13) and contains or overlaps with Special Biologic areas (MA – 4D) Buck Mountain, Pond Run Pond, Teets Bog, Tibbet Knob and Big Schloss. The recreation enhancement project proposals are within Remote Backcountry Areas (MA – 12D).

## Purpose and Need

The Forest Service is proposing a series of actions to move the landscape in the project area toward desired conditions described in the Forest Plan. The purpose of this project is to increase the resilience and proper function of ecological systems through the promotion of desired structure (successional stages and open canopy conditions), species composition, fire regimes, soil and water conservation, and sustainable recreation that will provide habitats to maintain plant and animal species viability and diversity and provide for public access. The Forest Plan identifies that mature and late successional stages of forests are well represented across the Forest; however, grassland, shrubland, regenerating forest, and open woodland conditions are lacking. The Forest Plan contains objectives to provide these lacking conditions through the use of prescribed fire and various silvicultural practices with timber harvest. This will be accomplished through the implementation of management prescriptions suitable to the project area, as described in the Forest Plan.

The project is focused primarily on regenerating and managing viable communities of shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) and other yellow pine species (in mixed stands with hardwoods) using various methods. To date, efforts to actively manage and monitor shortleaf pine and other yellow pines on federal land in the Central Appalachians has been somewhat limited.

By implementing the project, there will be a sizeable improvement in moving towards desired conditions as described in the Forest Plan. In MA-13 (Mosaics of Wildlife Habitat) key objectives include improving wildlife habitat by creating early successional habitat (hereinafter referred to as ESH) and open late successional stand conditions as well as to provide wood products to help meet local demand.

The Forest Plan identifies mature and late successional stages of forests as well-represented across the Forest; however, grassland, shrubland, regenerating forest, and open woodland conditions are lacking. Currently, the amount of ESH, young forest (5-20 year old stands), and open canopy stand conditions in the project area are less than one percent each of the total acreage (Table 1.). This is far below the desired 10% for ESH and 60-80% percent for open canopy described in the Forest Plan. If the proposal was not implemented, the District would miss the opportunity to increase the resilience of the stands within these habitat types and trend the project area towards proper function.

Within the communities in and around the Hardy County, WV there is a demand for wood products to satisfy local markets. Many of the habitat improvement and forest health objective in this project can be accomplished through commercial harvest and thinning treatments that would help to meet this demand.

## Enhance communities of mixed yellow pine and hardwood communities

While this project will focus on the regeneration and management of several yellow pine species in mixed stands, much of the attention will be on shortleaf pine. Other species of interest are Table Mountain pine (*Pinus pungens*) and pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*). The demise of yellow pines and shortleaf pine in particular is thought to mainly be due to a changed fire regime and extraction. Many decades ago, shortleaf pine was a sought-after timber tree in this area and was likely "high-graded" out of forest stands for lumber and other products (Guilden, 2012).

Much of the project area lies in two modeled ecozones (low elevation pine and pine oak heath) (Simon, 2012) which have historically included varying amounts of shortleaf pine, Table Mountain pine and pitch pine. Shortleaf pine could have been a substantial component of certain mixed hardwood / pine stands from piedmont to mountainous regions in Virginia. Matoon (1915), reported that these mixed stands ranged from 35 to 60% shortleaf pine. We feel that shortleaf pine in the mountains of western Virginia was generally an ancillary component of the forest but may have dominated in certain localized areas.

Implementing the project may provide an opportunity to conduct a number of studies looking at prescribed fire, reforestation techniques, including artificial and natural establishment of yellow pine in collaboration with the USFS Southern Experiment Station in Asheville, NC. We would like to learn more about how fire is best used in managing and perpetuating yellow pine species and in particular shortleaf. We also plan on looking at how "opening" size and stocking levels affect establishment and management of yellow pine among other factors. We are also interested in looking at how managing for yellow pine communities would affect wildlife, pollinators, non-native invasive plants and other resources.

## Create and enhance habitat

In addition to enhancing the yellow pine component in certain stands, the proposed actions would move the project area closer to the desired conditions described in the Forest Plan. The amount of ESH and "open canopy" conditions are deficient and are both <1% of the project area (Table 1). Current habitat conditions will be refined in an ecological departure analysis which is being prepared.

Native wildlife species have varying habitat requirements, critical habitat components, and ecosystem preferences. Many species need differing habitat characteristics throughout their life cycle. Successional stages of forests are the determining factor for presence, distribution, and abundance of a wide variety of wildlife. Some species depend on ESH or young forests, while some depend on late successional older forests, and others depend on a mix of both occurring within the landscape (Franklin 1988; Harris 1984; Hunter et al. 2001; Hunter 1988; Litvaitis 2001).

Timber harvest, prescribed fire, mechanical clearing, removal of non-native invasive plants, water source development, and other activities can provide for the ecological needs of wildlife species by providing a mosaic of different forest age classes and habitat types that are well distributed across a project area. Currently, the amount of ESH and open canopy stand conditions in the project area are less than one percent each of the total acreage (Table 1.). This is far below the desired ten percent for ESH and sixty to eighty percent for open canopy described in the Forest Plan. If the proposal was not implemented, the District would miss the opportunity to increase the resilience of the stands within these habitat types and trend the project area towards proper function. Table 1 shows the current ecological departure related to key habitat in the three 6th level watersheds and the project area as a whole on USFS lands.

### Offer wood products to contribute to the local market

Within the communities in and around the Hardy County, WV there is a demand for wood products to satisfy local markets. Many of the habitat improvement and forest health objectives in this project can be accomplished through commercial harvest and thinning treatments that would help to meet this demand.

The actions will contribute to the Forest Plan desired conditions of timber management by providing a variety of wood products for societal use that benefit the local economy and helps maintain a way of life associated with those living within the area (Forest Plan, p. 2-33). Furthermore, Forest Plan timber objective 1 states "A total timber sale program quantity of 3.8 to 5.5 million cubic feet (MMCF) is provided annually from lands suitable for timber production. This equates to about 1,800 to 3,000 acres per year." (Forest Plan, p. 3-25).

### Proposed Action

The proposed Forest Service vegetative treatments will be designed to enhance and perpetuate mixed yellow pine and hardwood communities while moving forest stands closer to the desired conditions described in the Forest Plan with regard to stand structure and habitat (Table 1). Figures reported below are approximate. Other associated proposed actions will be implemented as funding and resources allow.

Vegetation Management

- Within the 1,500-acre yellow pine enhancement area a mosaic of conditions would be created, including approximately 500 acres of "openings" ranging from ½ acre up to 40 acres where yellow pine would be regenerated and managed. Specific locations will likely be decided at implementation.

- Approximately 1,000 acres in the yellow pine enhancement area would be thinned to various stocking levels based on site conditions but would generally range from 40 to

80 $ft^2$, with some areas be left as reserves. Reforestation efforts would likely occur in certain thinned areas including shelterwood treatments or two aged stand management.

- Regeneration of approximately 600 acres to create ESH with oak species being a substantial component.
- Thin approximately 100 acres of yellow pine dominated stands to improve resiliency or create seed production areas.
- Treat 250 acres of immature forest stands to improve species composition.
- Use of commercial harvesting, non-commercial methods and prescribed fire with about 1 ½ miles of dozer line to meet objectives.
- Mechanical, chemical, and biological control of non-native invasive plants (NNIP) will occur prior to, during, and following implementation of vegetation treatments under the proposed action, to reduce their spread in project stands. Targeted species include mile a minute vine, ailanthus, multi-flora rose, and paulownia among others.
- Throughout the project area, non-native, invasive plant treatments may also occur to protect habitat for R8 sensitive species such as box huckleberry within and adjacent to Special Biological Areas (SBA).

Watershed Improvement

- Restoration of aquatic organism passage (AOP) in some streams by treating road-related structures (such as culverts or low water crossings) that presently impair or prevent aquatic passage, through structure maintenance, repair, replacement, or removal. AOP locations may be identified as the project develops.
- Throughout the project area, opportunities to perform soil and water restoration treatments will be reviewed through field surveys or using remote sensing technology to determine if they are contributing detrimental effects to watershed and aquatic resources. Legacy features (routes that were created as a result of past activities) and other features that are identified as issues may be rehabilitated as more information becomes available. The purpose of this rehabilitation is to improve watershed conditions and to reduce erosion and sedimentation. Proposed actions will be based on the site-specific conditions and may include soil restoration treatments such as (but not limited to) decompacting the surface, removing drainage structures, seeding, planting, placing woody debris on finished surfaces or full-scale obliteration and re-contouring to the approximate contour of the landscape.

Recreation Improvements

- Relocation of a portion of the Mill Mountain trail and relocation of the Mill Mountain and Tibbet Knob trailheads near the Wolf Gap Recreation Area for better public access and parking opportunities.
- Replace the existing pit toilet for the Sugar Knob cabin. The new toilet will be constructed closer to the Sugar Knob cabin for more convenient access and cleaning.

Wildlife Habitat Enhancement

- Enhance existing wildlife openings throughout the project area through a variety of means including brushing, disking, treating non-native invasive vegetation and reseeding or planting beneficial species (e.g. pollinator species) to improve open and brushy habitat.
- Creating cut-back borders, or a feathered edge, around permanent wildlife openings to create a transition where open habitats meet forest habitat.
- Create vernal wetlands or shallow ponds to provide seasonal and permanent water sources for wildlife.

Roads Management

- Reconstruct, and/or maintain existing roads as necessary for the proposed actions and public access and construct approximately 5 miles of temporary roads for access to proposed actions.
- Evaluate the road system to determine how road access (closures and openings) should be managed to meet the desired conditions.

**Table 1. Preliminary Ecological Departure analysis for the Project area and the three watersheds.**

| | Project Area | Three Springs – Lost River | Trout Run | Waites Run-Cacapon River |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Acres | 23,618 | 3,675 | 14,775 | 5,168 |
| | *Acres (% of area)* | *Acres (% of area)* | *Acres (% of area)* | *Acres (% of area)* |
| Current ESH | 208 *(<1%)* | 176 *(5%)* | 32 *(<1%)* | 0 *(0%)* |
| Projected ESH | 1,400 *(6%)* | 756 *(21%)* | 341 *(2%)* | 260 *(5%)* |
| Current Open | 200 *(<1%)* | 40 *(<1%)* | 120 *(<1%)* | 40 *(<1%)* |
| Projected Open | 1,300 *(6%)* | 605 *(17%)* | 295 *(2%)* | 40 *(<1%)* |
| *Data obtained from the USFS FSVeg spatial database and collected data.* | | | | |

## Decision to be Made

The Lee District Ranger is the responsible officials for this project and will decide whether to implement project activities as described in the proposed action, provide alternatives to the proposed action, or to continue with current management. The responsible official will also determine if there may be significant impacts that would require the preparation of an environmental impact statement.

Implementation of the Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project could immediately follow the decision by the District Ranger after the close of the objection period.

## Scoping Input Needed

Written comments concerning this proposal will be accepted during a 30-day scoping period ending on September 15, 2020. Comments may be submitted through the Sandy Ridge Yellow Pine Enhancement Project website via the web form:

https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=46063

This web form can also be accessed from the project website: https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46063 On the right side, you can select "Comment/Object on Project."

Written comments can also be submitted hardcopy to:

USDA Forest Service
ATTN: Jay Martin, North Zone NEPA Planner
95 Railroad Ave.
Edinburg, VA 22824

Please share any specific concerns and/or alternatives that you feel need to be considered within the context of this proposed action. Make your comments as concise as you can and address the proposed action specifically.

This project implements the George Washington National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and is not authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA). The project is subject to the objections process at 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B (http://www.ecfr.gov). Only specific written comments received during this or any other designated opportunity for public comment provide standing for objections. Also, to meet standing for objection, comments must meet the requirements of 36 CFR 218.8. For more information on the objection process and requirements, you may contact Jay Martin by email at jay.martin2@usda.gov.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and contact information of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this analysis and will be included in the final project record. Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

If you have any questions concerning this project or would like to know more information about it, please contact Kevin Kyle, Project Leader, at (540) 984-4101. If you should have any questions about the environmental assessment process contact Jay Martin, North Zone Environmental Coordinator, at (540) 432-0187.

Mary Yonce

MARY YONCE
District Ranger, Lee Ranger District